



CITY OF NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Economic Development Commission

MEETING MINUTES

March 8, 2012

Setti D. Warren
Mayor

Candace Havens
Director
Planning & Development

Amanda Stout
Senior Economic
Development Planner

Commissioners

Christopher Steele, Chair
Ronald Lipof, Vice Chair
Jack Leader, Secretary

Barry Abramson
David Abromowitz
Daphne Collins
Charles Eisenberg
Robert Gifford
Jane Ives
Peter Kai Jung Lew
John R.A. Pears
Philip Plottel
Darryl Settles

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Commissioners: Chris Steele (Chair), Ron Lipof (Vice Chair), Jack Leader (Secretary), Barry Abramson, David Abromowitz, Daphne Collins, Chuck Eisenberg, Jane Ives, Philip Plottel, Darryl Settles

Staff: Amanda Stout

Guests: Joy Huber, Bill Renke

Absent: Robert Gifford, Peter Lew, John Pears

1. EDC Business

- At 7:30 p.m. the EDC had a quorum of 6 members. Other EDC members arrived throughout the course of the meeting.

- Motion to approve February minutes. (Plottel, seconded by Eisenberg, 6-0).**

- Small Business Incubator** – Lipof reported that he has been in contact with the Suffolk University Law and Business School students who are working on the Incubator study. The students have divided into teams and are well into their work, and they will be ready to meet with EDC members for a progress report on Wednesday, March 21st at 4:00 p.m. **Motion to formalize a Subgroup for the Small Business Incubator project to include Lipof, Steele, Eisenberg, Ives, Abramson, and Settles. (Unanimous).**

- Business Attraction Subcommittee** – Steele reported that the group has made some progress with interviews and plans to synthesize information to present to the Board of Aldermen.

- Plottel noted that the Rox Diner in Newtonville recently removed some additional chairs because they were over the permitted capacity. Plottel suggested that the EDC think about ideas for changes that would assist businesses, particularly regarding zoning and parking requirements.

- Lipof commented on the recent decision from the Board of License Commissioners that denied a beer/wine License to the Star Market in Chestnut Hill. Lipof and other EDC commissioners raised concern about two aspects of this decision: (1) that there is a great deal of excitement about the Wegman's market that is slated to go in across Route 9 and the effect this will have on that specific business when they likely apply for a beer/wine license and (2) that there is a larger concern about placing the concerns of small business over the desire for a predictable regulatory environment that is fair to all businesses. **Motion to write a letter to Mayor Warren, the Board of Aldermen, and the Licensing Commission stating the EDC's concern regarding the denial of a beer/wine license to Star Market because it promotes a negative perception of Newton as a place to do business and because it may directly affect and jeopardize the economic development potential of Chestnut Hill Square, particularly the planned Wegman's. (Steele, second Lipof, 7-0).**

- **Existing Business Support Subcommittee** – Steele noted that Mayor Warren would be hosting a Business Roundtable meeting on March 14th. Collins and Stout will attend and report back.
- **New Initiatives** – Steele noted that Ald. Brian Yates, who could not attend tonight’s meeting, sent a memo to be distributed that evening to the members of the EDC and the Board of Aldermen. In the memo and attached documentation, Ald. Yates suggested that the EDC should investigate the “Main Streets” program. Steele reported on a recent conversation with Emmy Hahn, Massachusetts Downtown Initiative Coordinator at the Department of Housing and Community Development, in which Hahn suggested that neither the “Main Streets” program nor the Business Improvement District (BID) concept per se might be right for Newton. Rather, there are many aspects of both programs that are applicable to village revitalization and economic development in Newton. Steele noted that there are several neighborhood groups and efforts already underway, including Beautiful Newtonville, and that the City has been engaging landlords and business owners. Steele suggested that the EDC should reach out to these village organizations, merchants, and property owners and explore how aspects of Main Streets, BIDs, and other tools can help revitalize our villages.
- ***Motion to add village revitalization, including exploring the implementation of aspects of Main Streets districts and Business Improvement Districts, as applicable, to the mission of the Existing Business Support Subcommittee. (Eisenberg, 2nd by Plottel, 8-0).***
- Plottel noted that the memo from Ald. Yates also referenced the EDC’s previous efforts and suggested follow-up on the issue of Newton’s certification as a “bio-ready” community. He suggested that it might not be very difficult for Newton to advance from its current “Bronze” status to “Gold” status. The EDC will follow-up on this issue.

Joint Meeting with the Board of Aldermen

1. Welcome – The joint meeting with members of the Board of Aldermen opened at 8:00 p.m.

2. Introductions – The meeting opened with introductions.

Board Members Present:

Ward 1: Ald. Scott Lennon (President)

Ward 2: Ald. Stephen Linsky, Ald. Susan Albright, Ald. Marcia Johnson

Ward 3: Ald. Anthony Salvucci, Ald. Ted Hess-Mahan, Ald. Greer Tan Swiston

Ward 4: Ald. Jay Harney, Ald. Amy Sangiolo

Ward 6: Ald. Dick Blazar, Ald. Vicki Danberg

Ward 7: Ald. Lisle Baker, Ald. Rutheanne Fuller

Ward 8: Ald. Cheryl Lappin (Vice President), Ald. David Kalis

3. Brief Overview of EDC Mission and Role – Chris Steele discussed the purpose of the meeting.

4. EDC Projects

- **Small Business Incubator** – Lipof introduced the project and the status of the students’ work. He explained that this is a good economic time to explore a small business incubator in Newton. Ald. Baker suggested that the EDC look into the MIT New Business Enterprise Forum and noted that many MIT and Harvard Business School faculty live in Newton and might be engaged to assist with programs. Collins thanked Lipof for his leadership on this issue, noting that Lipof and Settles, two recent EDC appointments, are both business owners.
- **Business Attraction Subcommittee** – Steele described the EDC’s two key areas of focus that have been led by two subcommittees. The Business Attraction Subcommittee has been speaking with mid-size businesses, developers, and brokers to try to distill what it is like to attract business to Newton. There was a discussion of vacancy rates in the City and what can be done to bring in more

business. Eisenberg noted that the percent of the City's tax revenue derived from commercial property has dropped over the years, from about 28% to 18% of the City's tax base, which adds stress to the City's budget. Plottel said that the problem is not a lack of suitable vacant space, but rather structural problems regarding (1) predictability of permitting and (2) the special permit process that, for example, requires many restaurants to seek support for parking relief.

- **Small Business Support Subcommittee** – Collins reported that this subcommittee has been talking with several small business owners each month. She noted that it is good for the EDC and staff to be out in the community and that many businesses were genuinely happy to be approached to share their experience in starting and growing their businesses.

5. Discussion

- **Banks** – Ald. Danberg noted that parking and permitting are the issues she hears most from the business community. She said that the City used to work with landlords to identify their needs and then seek out brokers and tenants to fill spaces. She commended the EDC for their letter regarding a one-year moratorium on banks on the first floor. Ald. Johnson agreed, mentioning the related overlay concept and noting that the problem is not just vacancies but that banks sometimes force out good small businesses and then remain in a village for a long time. Eisenberg and Plottel clarified that the EDC supports the overlay concept, but that the moratorium was prompted by the urgency of the current recession and the fact that when banks come into village centers, they often stay for a long time and seldom contribute to village identity. They suggested that it is often easier for banks to go in village centers than other uses (due to parking requirements) and that the City should not advantage what we are not looking for and disadvantage what we are looking for in village businesses. Steele added that the EDC is working to understand the motivations and barriers to small businesses and support a regulatory environment that contributes to the economic sustainability of village centers.
- **Special Permit Process** – Ald. Hess-Mahan said he wanted to clarify some misconceptions about the special permit process. On Wells Avenue, for example, the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology wants to come in and they need an amendment to the deed; the City has been working to accommodate them due to the urgency of the project. He noted that the Land Use Committee has heard more projects in the past two years than they had in the past. He suggested that the Board is not the hang-up; the Zoning Code is the hang-up. He said there is a 40-50% vacancy rate in the Wells Avenue Office Park.
- **Village Revitalization** – Ald. Linsky noted that Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) were discussed at the joint meeting last year and that it is important to include property owners in the conversation. Steele mentioned the Property Owner Roundtable meeting that the Mayor held in January and reiterated the idea that the hybrid Main Street and BID concept might be created in Newton. Ald. Danberg wanted to take a long view on landlords and help them create value by marketing the 2nd floor spaces.
- **Best Practices** – Ald. Johnson suggested that the EDC should look beyond Newton for ideas and bring back best practices. Steele told the group that he, Collins, and Stout have been attending lunchtime meetings with other economic development staff and commissioners from nearby cities and towns.
- **Shopping Centers** – The group discussed the status of the Atrium Mall, which is nearly empty and for sale by the property owner. Some stores left due to regional competition at other malls and shopping centers. Ald. Sangiolo referenced a recent Boston Globe article about the Wellesley Square Initiative and questioned how they were able to fill vacant storefronts and revitalize their downtown shopping area. Joy Huber, a Newtonville resident who is active with Beautiful Newtonville, noted that she had recently spoken with the Wellesley Planning Director who said that the town had a comprehensive program that included beautification, lighting, and signage and staff time and funds dedicated to the project.

- **Promotion and Business Attraction** – The group discussed the need to better promote Newton as a business location and to get proactive in bringing in new business. Abromowitz asked the group what tools we as a City have to recruit small businesses. Others asked if there are any incentives that the City can give small businesses. Ald. Hess-Mahan said that the problem is that in our villages we do not have a vision, a plan, or a “brand” as a starting point and that the villages are a hodge-podge of zones. He suggested creating visions for the villages and zoning accordingly, which will assist in knowing what businesses to attract. Ald. Johnson asked what role the EDC can play in helping to fill vacant storefronts.
- **Economic Data** – Ald. Fuller suggested that the EDC create a brief “report card” or “snapshot” of the economic health of Newton. This would include information on vacancy rates, rents, employment, and other data that could be updated twice a year and presented to the Board of Aldermen. The EDC and staff will follow-up, possibly including EDSAT data.

Ald. Lennon noted that he would like to see these meetings between the EDC and the Board continue in the future. The EDC 2011 Annual Report will be sent to the Board in their next packets and posted on the EDC website.

Motion to adjourn at 9:30 p.m. (Plottel, 2nd by Eisenberg, 10-0).

The meeting adjourned at 9:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Amanda Stout, AICP, Senior Economic Development Planner